

## 1 Conventional forest science

To anyone familiar with the literature on the sociology of science it will come as no surprise that scientific paradigms respond in part to the particular worldviews and interests of the groups that develop them. Admittedly, the tragicomic history of proletarian science in Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao Tse-Tung's China highlights the dangers of taking this argument too far. Nevertheless, it remains true that scientists' personal experiences, biases, and institutional incentives heavily influence the type of questions they ask, the data they examine, and the conclusions they draw.

This comes through particularly clearly in the case of tropical forests. Despite increasing evidence to the contrary, much of the writing on tropical forests continues to portray them as static, fragile, and completely natural ecosystems threatened by burgeoning hordes of poor farmers. From this it follows that governments should protect these forests from the poor by fencing them off, turning them over to large logging companies for safe keeping, and fining or jailing the poor farmers that use them. Neo-Malthusian thinking pervades a large share of the dominant paradigms and conventional wisdom.

To say that these ideas have become so entrenched in the forest research community because they suit the particular interests of those who sponsor the research, grossly oversimplifies reality. The links between science and society are too complex to reduce to such a mechanistic construct. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the neo-Malthusian paradigms have served to legitimate the use of tropical forests to meet the needs of conservation organisations, government bureaucracies, and large timber companies, rather than those of local people.

## 2 Emerging pro-poor perspectives

Still, there are other voices. A growing body of research, of which the work leading up to and documented in this *Bulletin* forms a part, demonstrates that small farmers and extractors constantly help to create and shape the world's tropical forests, rather than just destroy them. People and forests have evolved together and

# Towards a Pro-poor Forest Science

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forests have proved more dynamic and resilient than anyone ever imagined. Claims about poor rural farmers permanently deforesting huge areas have been greatly exaggerated, particularly in Africa. Meanwhile, logging companies with legal management plans designed and supervised by professional foresters have contributed to massive forest destruction in Southeast Asia. So have large ranchers and mechanised cereal producers in Latin America and tree crop plantations in Asia. To destroy huge areas of forest permanently and replace them with monocultures generally requires capital and market access that poor people simply do not have.

There are, of course, instances where poor people greatly degrade their ecosystems and situations vary from one region, group, or economic context to the next. Rising populations in forested regions can put pressure on the local resources, although under other circumstances, they may encourage the recuperation of degraded landscapes. One must be careful not simply to replace one dogma by another. But that does not mean that one can escape from the need to frame any particular set of findings within some broader paradigms.

The paucity of reliable data only makes matters worse. One reason such contradictory discourses about tropical forests have persisted for so long, is that often no-one has sufficient data to demonstrate conclusively the superiority of one to the other. This is particularly true when the issues concern long-term trends, or the relations between cause and effect. On-going research is slowly filling in some of the gaps; other issues will remain uncertain. In the meantime, one must choose which stories to believe in.

Within this context, one can say that over the last two decades of the twentieth century, a distinct pro-poor forestry science has emerged. Like all science, it is part fact, part ideology. It uses concrete evidence to debunk the myths underlying the more neo-Malthusian forest science, while at the same time filling in the blanks with its own set of unproven hypotheses. When in doubt, it takes a preferential option for the poor, an ethical judgment that those that sow have a right to harvest, and those that suffer have a right to survive.

The papers presented in this issue, which build on earlier path-breaking work by Melissa Leach, James Fairhead and Kojo Amanor, present pro-poor forest science at its best. They combine insights and evidence from various disciplines and locations to provide a compelling alternative vision of the world's tropical forests. They also highlight the systematic biases that underlie much of what passes for forest science and current conventional wisdom about forest policy.

### 3 Influencing policy

Now, however, comes the hard part: going from critical analysis to policy relevance. The first step in that regard is to realise that it will probably be insufficient simply to provide additional scientific evidence to convince policymakers to change their views and their policies. There are generally substantial vested interests that the current policies are designed to defend and that neo-Malthusian forest science has tended to legitimate.

Faced with that fact, researchers basically have two different options for changing to influence policy in a 'pro-poor' direction. On one hand, they can seek to convince the existing policymakers and policy implementers that it is actually in their best interests to adopt 'pro-poor' policies and policy narratives. Alternatively, they can try to change the balance of power, so that the current policymakers and policy implementers lose influence to other, more pro-poor, groups. (Of course, these options are not necessarily mutually exclusive.) Both of these options imply thinking in terms of building alliances that are strong enough to overcome the groups that favour the status quo.

No matter which of these two options the researcher chooses, to a certain extent, influencing policy implies learning how to think and act 'politically'. That implies changing the way the researchers talk, the channels they use to communicate, and the types of arguments they use. Perhaps most importantly, it implies thinking through who they are trying to convince and/or legitimise, and what messages and formats are most likely to have the desired effect. Being 'right' is not enough.

To achieve impact, scientists must package their research messages in ways that appeal to existing

policymakers and policy implementers and/or help legitimise social reform movements in the eyes of the general public or other key stakeholders. And they must reach these broader audiences without losing the scientific credibility of their arguments. That is not easy.

Like most scientists, the authors of this collection emphasise complexity and location-specificity. Policymakers and the general public, on the other hand, thrive on over-simplification and broad generalisations. Most policies are blunt instruments, and they get blunter as they go from initial intent to implementation. Public opinion follows sound bites, and one can only cram so much complexity into a 30-second message. Making those messages mean something to people who have never stepped foot in the tropics is even harder. For pro-poor science to make a difference, it must adapt to those realities.

It is all very well to emphasise the need for local initiatives and the uniqueness of each specific context, however increasingly, many of the key decisions influencing prices, capital flows, technological change, and public opinion are global and that is where the power lies. Exclusively local focuses run the risk of ignoring the most important trends and forces. The real challenge is to think locally, but act globally, to shape global processes in ways that are less destructive for local initiatives. Again, this implies a strategic vision of identifying where key decisions get made, who makes them, and where the opportunities are to shift the balance of power in those arenas.

Similarly, while much of the work presented here – and all good political ecology – stresses the conflicting interests of different groups, politicians generally seek to mask such differences. Successful politics is the art of building coalitions and alliances. To do that requires being purposefully vague and the downplaying of any existing differences. Any successful pro-poor forest discourse must have a broad appeal. That means that pensioners, office workers, housewives, and children, must all be able to relate to the message and see their dreams reflected in it.

The question then becomes: How do we construct a pro-poor forest discourse and policy proposals

that are reasonably simple and generally applicable, have broad appeal, do not misconstrue the facts, and are meaningful to both local and global audiences? Again, there are no simple answers to this, but there are some general principles:

1. *Link the discussion to what people are already talking about.* Journalists refer to that as providing a 'hook'. Climate change, forest fires, foot and mouth disease, war, corruption, economic crisis, and endangered species are already in the public eye. A pro-poor forestry science can and must show the relation between these issues and poor people's access to forest resources (or lack thereof).
2. *Personify the issues.* Villagers are not abstract concepts. They are individuals with names, families, beliefs, and aspirations. They are grandmothers and friends. A pro-poor forest science can never lose sight of that. Those are the things we all have in common. They are the reason why faceless, faraway bureaucrats and managers should never be allowed to take away their livelihoods.
3. *Appeal to common values and shared terminology.* In today's world, everyone believes in 'sustainable development'. We all like 'decentralisation', 'good governance', 'fiscal responsibility', 'secure property rights', 'participation', 'civil society', 'transparency', and 'deregulation'. Politicians and bureaucrats like these terms because they are sufficiently vague. For the same reason, these are terms that can justify both pro-poor forest strategies and the contrary. Any group can put its own spin on what they mean, and use them to its own advantage.
4. *Convince people that pro-poor forest policies are in their own best interest.* These are the policies that can reduce the risk of violence in forested areas. They are the ones that can help keep corrupt politicians out of office. They are the most effective means of protecting the environment. They can save taxpayers money. They can make you feel better about yourself as a person.

Clearly, good packaging of good ideas is not enough. Ultimately, change depends on shifting the

basic power relations in society, which requires much more than a good sales approach. But for scientists to contribute to that process effectively, they will have to significantly improve in marketing their ideas.

## 4 Conclusion

There are of course, hundreds of millions of decent people out there who depend on forests and other natural vegetation to survive. They need them to cook, to farm, to heal, to find shelter, to earn money. Most have no secure property rights over those forests. Many face threats from more

powerful groups who want to take away their access to the forests, or to use their power to force them to pay fines and/or bribes. Many of the policies that threaten these people are carried out in the name of protecting the environment. However, there is practically no evidence that they are effective in that. It is not very scientific. And it is not fair. As scientists, we have a moral obligation to illustrate that.

## Notes

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